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SUBJECT: WHERE ARE THE WOMEN?: FEMALE REGISTRATION FOR PROVINCIAL COUNCIL ELECTIONS

REF: A. KABUL 1094
B. KABUL 998

¶1. (SBU) SUMMARY: Since the April 25 opening of the two-week candidate registration period, over 500 individuals have registered as provincial council (PC) candidates for the August elections. The Independent Election Commission's (IEC) initial reports on candidate registration indicate, however, that few women are signing up. In six provinces - Paktia, Paktika, Khost, Nuristan, Uruzgan and Kandahar - no female candidates have yet emerged. Other provinces have only a few female candidates, and in many provinces female incumbents have yet to step forward. Post is coordinating with the IEC, women's civil society organizations, and supportive political leaders to urge potential female candidates to register before the May 8 deadline. END SUMMARY.

WOMEN CANDIDATES WELCOME, BUT...

¶2. (U) The electoral law reserves 25 percent of provincial council seats for women; if no female candidates participate in the elections, the seats will remain empty. According to UNIFEM, four provincial councils have unclaimed women's seats from the 2005 provincial council elections. The IEC noted on the second day of candidate registration that women account for only 30 of the 478 PC registration packages collected by potential candidates. PC candidate registration (ref A) requires only that an applicant be at least 18 years old, hold Afghan citizenship for at least 10 years, show evidence of support from 200 voters and pay a 4,000 Afs (USD 85) registration fee.

SECURITY, OBSCURITY, DISILLUSIONMENT LIMITING PARTICIPATION

¶3. (SBU) Opinions differ as to the biggest stumbling block for female candidates. The IEC cites the limited mandate and poor public opinion of PCs as the main detriment, while female MPs suggest security concerns and lack of information as restricting candidates. On April 29, Afghan Women's Council director Fatana Gailani told poloff that security concerns were the primary obstacle preventing women from running in the provincial council elections. Responding to poloff's question as to why there were not yet female candidates in provinces that are considered relatively safe, such as Panjshir, Gailani stated that many families would use poor security as an excuse to bar women from running even if it was not a serious concern. Gailani also speculated that many potential female candidates were uninterested in the provincial council races because they perceived the PCs as weak institutions lacking a clear political mandate.

¶4. (SBU) On April 30, Lower House MP Qadria Yasdanparast (Kabul, Tajik) likewise speculated to poloffs that security concerns were preventing female candidate registration. She also suggested that the IEC's public outreach for candidate registration (ref B) was insufficient. The same day, Post

learned that three sitting female PC members from Kandahar were interested in registering to run again. The women, then in Kabul, nonetheless feared for their security if required to return to Kandahar to register as candidates.

¶5. (SBU) Separately, Lower House MP Tahera Meherzada (Kapisa, Tajik), chairwoman of the women's affairs committee, agreed that insecurity and fears of political violence prevented some women from running for provincial council slots. She believes that PCs are perceived as heavily influenced by the executive branch rather than as independent bodies. Potential candidates are reluctant to vie for these positions, skeptical that if elected, they would be allowed to carry out their responsibilities. Meherzada said public awareness campaigns could be helpful in attracting more women candidates as each province has hundreds of potential candidates, but without more support they will remain silent.

ENCOURAGEMENT INITIATIVES

¶6. (U) On April 27 the Afghan Women's Network hosted IEC External Relations Director M. Farid Afghanzai for a discussion on increasing the number of female candidates in the PC elections. Afghanzai gave the 75 attendees, representing different women's advocacy NGOs, an overview of the PC candidate requirements and distributed candidate enrollment paperwork. He told the attendees that to date only 49 women had picked up provincial council candidate forms from the IEC and in some provinces, there were no women candidates. Afghanzai urged the women present to identify

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potential candidates and encourage them to run.

¶7. (SBU) Several MPs, including Deputy Speaker of the Meshrano Jirga Mirwais Yaseni (Nangarhar, Pashtun) say they will mobilize volunteers to recruit female PC candidates. Yasdanparast suggested MPs could engage IDLG Director Jelani Popal to promote public governor support for female candidate registration. Yasdanparast said that she would organize women MPs to encourage additional registrations. MPs Fawzia Koofi (Badakhshan, Tajik) and Shukria Barakzai (Kabul, Pashtun) were alarmed at the low number of women registering as candidates, and are activating their network of supporters to identify and encourage greater participation. Barakzai called for the Ministry of Women's Affairs to play a lead role in encouraging more women candidates and urged civil society groups not to leave the ministry out of the loop.

¶8. (SBU) We likewise are engaging with the IEC, civil society and through our PRTs to encourage female candidates to register. To support the IEC's publicity efforts, the Embassy will fund a series of radio spots encouraging women to run in the provincial council races. Embassy officers are highlighting the importance of women's participation in the electoral process - both as voters and candidates - in meetings with representatives of women's NGOs and government officials. Our PRTs will reach out to sitting female PC members to find out if they will stand for reelection and to discuss the reasoning behind their decisions; we will report on this SEPTEL.

SOME REASONS FOR OPTIMISM

¶9. (U) Republican Party (secular, multi-ethnic) Senior Women's Affairs Advisor Adelah Bahram said her party will run female candidates in Kabul, Nangarhar, Helmand, Sar-e-Pul, Balkh, and Herat PC races. The party had identified candidates for these races and was assisting them in obtaining the 200 required signatures and completing the registration paperwork. Bahram was confident her party's candidates would complete the IEC registration process by May 18. Republican Party Chairman Sebghatullah Sanjar said the

party would register female candidates in provinces where they would win by default in the absence of other challengers. UNAMA representatives also report that in 2005, female candidates waited to register until the end of the registration period.

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